

Sample

# The Use of the Old Testament



## in the Book of Mormon

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THE USE OF THE OLD TESTAMENT IN THE BOOK OF MORMON

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THE OLD TESTAMENT DEPARTMENT  
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## PREFACE

The Book of Mormon came from the press in Palmyra, N.Y, in 1830, the work of a local resident, Joseph Smith, Jr. It claimed to be an additional revelation from God made to the ancient inhabitants of America, who were really of Israelite origin and were the ancestors of the American Indians. The major portion of the book concerned a group of Hebrews who allegedly came to America from Jerusalem about 600 B.C. and were joined by a second group some ten years later. These emigrants divided into two factions, the righteous, civilized portion called Nephites, and the wicked group, the Lamanites, who became cursed with dark skin and degenerated into the savage state in which the white men found them at the time they discovered America. The savage portion, by about A.D. 420, had succeeded in completely over-running and exterminating the civilized Nephite group, leaving only the wicked Lamanites to inhabit the land.

The main theme of the Book of Mormon is to recount the events that took place among these early Americans. The book professes to record their history, wars and religious struggles. They are presented as having the Old Testament scriptures, knowing the gospel message, having prophets among them who presented clearer prophecies of the coming of the Savior than are presented in the Old Testament, and finally being visited by Jesus himself after his resurrection. A portion of the book is concerned with establishing that the remnant of the Lamanites (the Indians) are really part of the tribes of Israel to whom the

Old Testament promised a restoration to the God of the Bible and a regathering to Zion. However, Zion for this segment of Israel, the book claims, will be on the American continent, while the rest of the Israelite people will return to Jerusalem. Passages from the Old Testament are used throughout the book to establish these points.

Toward the close of the book a small work called Ether is introduced in which an earlier migration to America is depicted. This group reportedly left the Old World directly after the confusion of languages at the Tower of Babel. They, like the later emigrants, divided into the righteous and the wicked, and fought each other to complete extinction of the entire group. They left only one solitary survivor who made contact with the Israelites who arrived after 600 B.C. The records of this group were allegedly recorded on 24 gold plates, and that record was condensed onto other gold plates by the last surviving Nephite about A.D. 420. That Nephite, Moroni, also condensed the record of his own people onto similar plates of gold, said farewell to the reader, and buried them in a hill he called Cumorah. In 1823 this figure, by then the angel Moroni, appeared to Joseph Smith, informing him of the existence of the golden plates and assigning him the role of translating this ancient record. Accordingly, late in 1827 Joseph Smith claimed he acquired the plates and some time in 1828 began his translation, which he completed by mid-1829.

Several studies have been made by Mormons of the Old Testament material quoted in the Book of Mormon. Since these Old Testament quotations were altered in places so that they vary from the King James Version text basically used in the book, the Mormon studies have been mainly concerned with locating textual variants in Hebrew manuscripts

and other ancient versions that support the changes made in the Book of Mormon text. However, very few of the book's alterations of the Old Testament can be supported in this manner. Therefore a good deal of effort has gone into attempts to *conjecture* how the Book of Mormon alterations might have occurred and to justify the changes that were made. The changes made in the Book of Mormon's quotation of the biblical text are looked upon as superior readings of a *Vorlage* text no longer available to scholars for study, since the gold plates on which it was inscribed were returned to the angel for safe-keeping. All of these studies look at the Old Testament passages in the Book of Mormon through this narrow slit which blocks off examining the material from the vantage point of the 19th century context in which the book was written. This study seeks to remedy this weakness by examining the Old Testament passages from the point of view of exactly *how* they differ from the King James Version and *how* they are employed in the work itself. It is hoped that this fresh perspective will yield a better understanding of the structure and content of the Book of Mormon, the work which Joseph Smith once characterized as his "gold book business."

This study would never have been possible without the courtesies extended to the writer by numerous libraries and the help of specialists and friends. Special thanks, therefore, are extended to several institutions for opening up their research facilities: to the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints in Independence, Missouri, their Historian, Richard P. Howard, their archivist L. Madelon Brunson, and their librarians for the extended use of their archives, for their helpfulness and special privileges granted; to the Historical Department of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day

Saints in Salt Lake City and to their archivist Donald T. Schmidt for access to documents in their collection; to Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah, and to Mr. Chad J. Flake for use of their facilities, access to their Special Collections and use of their materials on loan; to the John Crerar Library and to the Field Museum in Chicago, and especially to Dr. John W. Fitzpatrick of the latter institution, for their help in the etymology of bird and mammal names; to the Laboratory of Ornithology of Cornell University and especially to Dr. Stephen Kress and Librarian Helen Lapham for sharing their expertise about the *Fratercula*; to libraries and librarians of numerous institutions, but especially Harvard University, Washington University in St. Louis, the University of Illinois in Champaign-Urbana, and the Boston Public Library for providing copies of rare publications; finally to the Library and Librarians of Covenant Theological Seminary for arranging numerous inter-library loans, and for the unlimited use of their facilities.

I am also particularly indebted to several persons for sharing their knowledge and advice. I would like to express my appreciation for such help to my advisors Dr. R. Laird Harris, Dr. Joseph Hall, and the late Dr. J. Barton Payne. Valuable help in Hebrew and Semitic matters was given by my good friend Dr. Milton Fisher, Professor of Hebrew and President of the Reformed Episcopal Seminary, Philadelphia. My thanks are also extended to another good friend, Mrs. Olive Wilcox of Orrick, Missouri, for sharing her extensive knowledge of the Book of Mormon. Finally, a special note of thanks is expressed to my friend and associate, H. Michael Marquardt for reading the drafts of this manuscript, repeatedly sharing much helpful material from his files, and making many valuable suggestions and corrections.



In a class by itself I want to thank my loving wife, without whose patience, encouragement, suggestions and typing skill this paper could never have reached completion.

April 1981

### UPDATE

A small amount of updating has recently been added, as well as the correction of a few typographical slips overlooked in previous proofing. My appreciation is expressed to my longtime friend and associate H. Michael Marquardt for bringing most of these to my attention.

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## INTRODUCTION

### Joseph Smith's Knowledge of the Bible

#### Early Claim to Bible Understanding

The earliest attempt to write an account of the origin of the Mormon Church was made by its founder Joseph Smith, Jr. about 1832. Written just two years after the publication of the Book of Mormon and the organization of the church, this history represents its author, Joseph Smith, Jr., as an earnest and perceptive reader of the Bible. Joseph wrote of his teen-age years that:

At about the age of twelve years my mind became Seriously imprest with regard to the all imporent concerns for the welfare of my immortal Soul which led me to Searching the Scriptures believing as I was taught, that they contained the word of God thus applying myself to them . . . I discovered that [men] did not . . . adorn their profession by a holy walk and Godly conversation agreeable to what I found contained in that sacred depository . . . thus from the age of twelve years to fifteen I pondered many things . . . and by Searching the Scriptures I found that mankind did not come unto the Lord but that they had apostatised from the true and liveing faith and there was no society or denomination that built upon the Gospel of Jesus Christ as recorded in the new testament . . .<sup>1</sup>

Thus Joseph claimed that his personal understanding of the Bible, which he regarded as being the correct understanding, led him to conclude that all denominations had apostatized from the New Testament faith and

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1 Joseph Smith, Jr., "A History of the Life of Joseph Smith, Jr.," [1832], Church Archives, Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Salt Lake City, Utah, pp. 1-2. Transcription published in Dean C. Jessee, "Early Accounts of the First Vision," *Brigham Young University Studies* 9 (Spring 1969):278-280. Original spelling, punctuation and capitalization have been preserved.

the gospel of Christ. In addition to his professed biblical understanding, Joseph mentioned earlier in this history that his “goodly Parents” “spared no pains to instructing me in the Christian religion.” From these assertions one would expect to find that Joseph Smith, Jr. had a good background in the material contained in the Bible.

### Further Acquaintance with the Bible

Joseph Smith’s acquaintance with the Bible was not just limited to what he had learned from his family and had acquired from his personal Bible study. Orsamus Turner, a young apprentice printer at the Palmyra news press, where Joseph frequently stopped to pick up his father’s newspaper, recalled Joseph’s early association with the Methodist Church in the community. Joseph, he stated, “after catching a spark of Methodism . . . was a very passable exhorter in evening meetings.”<sup>2</sup> In the Methodist system a sermon was preached in which the sermon points were drawn from a given text or passage. At the conclusion of the message an exhortation was usually given by another speaker who would re-emphasize the points made in the preacher’s exposition and plead with the people to take seriously the message that they had just heard. The Methodist structure even provided for the licensing of official “exhorters” by the District Conference.<sup>3</sup> However, in more informal situations such as camp meetings and evening services (where the liturgical format used at the morning worship was dispensed with) even

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2 O[rsamus]Turner, *History of the Pioneer Settlement of Phelps and Gorham’s Purchase* (Rochester: William Ailing, 1851), p. 214.

3 *The Doctrines and Discipline of the Methodist Episcopal Church* (New York: J. Emory and B. Waugh, 1828), pp. 43, 28, 45, 64, 74.

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those as young as twelve or thirteen could rise and give exhortations.<sup>4</sup> Since Mr. Turner completed his apprenticeship and left Palmyra sometime in 1821, his words provide a valuable insight into the biblical background acquired by Joseph Smith, Jr. before his sixteenth birthday. Joseph, of course, did not become a licensed exhorter because such persons had to be members in full standing with the denomination. However, Pomeroy Tucker, owner of the local newspaper, remarked that Joseph did go so far as to join the Methodist probationary class, which required meeting with the Class Leader “at least six months on trial.”<sup>5</sup> Turner also mentioned that Joseph shared in “our juvenile debating club” where “he helped us solve some portentous questions of moral or political ethics.”<sup>6</sup> In the highly religious atmosphere of those days, the Bible could not help but receive an occasional mention in regard to those moral questions. Thus in several ways at an early age Joseph was able to absorb a quantity of biblical ideas and passages that come to the fore in his various literary productions. His experience in debating and exhorting prepared him to handle this material in a largely extemporaneous manner. One is not surprised to find biblical phrases (as well as revivalistic terminology) richly sprinkled through the Book of Mormon and Joseph Smith’s revelations, and these phrases are drawn from the King James version so popular in the American churches of Joseph’s day.

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4 Ibid., p. 71.

5 Ibid., p. 80; Pomeroy Tucker, *Origin, Rise and Progress of Mormonism* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1867), p. 18.

6 Turner, *History*, p. 214.

### Down Playing Joseph's Biblical Knowledge

Six years later, in 1838 when he began to write what is now regarded by Mormons as the official account of the origin of Mormonism. Joseph eliminated all reference to his earlier claims of biblical expertise. The motivation for his religious awakening was shifted to the revival in which members of his family were led to join the Presbyterian Church. However, concerning that revival his mother later wrote that Joseph refused from the first to attend even a single meeting, and boasted, "I can take my Bible and go into the woods, and learn more in two hours than you can learn at meeting in two years."<sup>7</sup> Today Mormons have followed Joseph's lead and fixed on this revival as the beginning of his religious motivation. This enables them to view Joseph Smith, Jr. as an unlettered country farm boy and therefore makes the production of the Book of Mormon look really miraculous. In his later official account, Joseph even disclaimed knowing that all the denominations were wrong and wrote, "For at this time it had never entered into my heart that all were wrong."<sup>8</sup> This has more recently been deleted, relieving Joseph of this embarrassing contradiction in his account of the origin of his church. However, if Joseph's earlier story of his Bible reading is closer to the truth than his later portrayal of himself, one would expect to find evidence of this in his writing of the Book of Mormon. This is precisely

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7 Lucy Smith, *Biographical Sketches of Joseph Smith the Prophet and His Progenitors for Many Generations* (Liverpool: S. W. Richards, 1853), p. 90. The preliminary draft in the LDS Church Archives, Salt Lake City, is practically identical in wording. At other points the preliminary manuscript differs substantially from the final printed form. See Appendix B for the preliminary draft.

8 *BYU Studies* 9 (Spring 1969): 290. The entire account from the original manuscript has been transcribed on pp. 287-291.

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what one does find when examining the Book of Mormon.<sup>9</sup>

### Types of Use of the Old Testament

The use of the Old Testament in the Book of Mormon falls into three main categories. (1) It provided a framework for Joseph Smith's tale about the ancient inhabitants of America. The largest portion of the book is set in an Old Testament time-frame and the names and events largely reflect this Old Testament model. (2) It offered an opportunity for Joseph Smith to express his understanding of some significant Old Testament passages. Twenty-one chapters from Isaiah and two from Malachi are quoted, as well as portions of Exodus and Micah and scattered verses from other sections of the Old Testament. These were modified to varying degrees by the Mormon leader and provide an insight into his knowledge and understanding of key Old Testament passages. (3) It supplied support for his unique eschatological position. In a day when only a few preachers and Bible scholars looked for a literal return of the Jews to Palestine, Rev. Ethan Smith, a Congregational minister, not only argued the case for such a return to Jerusalem, but insisted that he had found the "lost tribes" of Israel in the Indian nations of the American continent. The Book of Mormon apparently picked up on this line of prophetic argumentation set forth by Rev. Ethan Smith and, with only

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9 Joseph Smith, Jr., *The Book of Mormon* (Palmyra, NY: E. B Grandin, 1830); photomechanically reprinted in Wilford Wood, *Joseph Smith Begins His Work*, vol. 1 (Salt Lake City: Deseret News Press, 1958). Citations of the Book of Mormon by page number hereafter are to the 1830 edition. Citations of the Book of Mormon by chapter and verse are to the current printing of the Utah 1920 edition, *The Book of Mormon* (Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, 1980). A conversion chart to the chapter and versification used in the edition published by the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints is included in the Appendix A.

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slight modification, molded it to fit the plot-line of the Book of Mormon. The Old Testament, therefore, played a major part in the production of this work. So any study of the Book of Mormon that overlooks the role played by the Old Testament in the formation of that book, fails to examine a significant part of the process that led to the writing of Joseph Smith's major work.

## I. FRAMEWORK FOR A TALE ABOUT ANCIENT AMERICA

### The Book of Mormon Intermingles the Testaments

When one begins to read the Book of Mormon, if he is well-acquainted with the Bible, he will at once be impressed with the large scale use of biblical materials in the book. Not only is there an unskilled mimicking of the style of the King James Version, but there is an artificial clarity added to that portion of the Book of Mormon that claims to date from the Old Testament period. This contrived clarity is the result of writing back into that Old Testament period New Testament words, phrases and quotations, as well as the introduction of New Testament concepts and teachings into that time-frame. More than two hundred such New Testament quotations can be listed.<sup>10</sup> For example, the words of Christ from the Gospels appear on the lips of the Old Testament characters. They exhort that “ye must pray always and not faint” (2 Nephi 32:9 / Luke 18:1), warn that some will go “into everlasting fire prepared for the devil and his angels” (Mosiah 26:27 / Matthew 25:41), and assure the reader that at the resurrection “then shall the righteous shine forth in the kingdom of God” (Alma 40:25 / Matthew 13:43). The Apostle Paul’s words are used to remind Old Testament believers that they should be “steadfast and immovable, always abounding in good works” (Mosiah 5:15 / 1 Corinthians 15:58).

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<sup>10</sup> For listing see H. Michael Marquardt, “The Use of the Bible in the Book of Mormon,” *The Journal of Pastoral Practice* 2, no. 2 (1978), pp. 118-132.



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Until that time they need to grow “in the nurture and admonition of the Lord” (Enos 1 / Ephesians 6:4), and look forward to the time when “this mortal shall put on immortality” (Enos 27 / 1 Cor. 15:53). Furthermore, New Testament events are, in the Book of Mormon, often “predicted” in the words in which they are described in the New Testament. Thus John the Baptist is “predicted” to come and prepare the way for the One “mightier than I” (1 Nephi 10:8 / Luke 3:16), “whose shoe’s latchet I am not worthy to unloose” (1 Nephi 10:8 / John 1:27). Similarly there shall be “one fold, and one shepherd” (1 Nephi 22:25 / John 10:16) and “one faith and one baptism” (Mosiah 18:21 / Ephesians 4:5).

### Anachronistic Use of the New Testament

This wholesale transporting of later biblical material into an earlier period in the Book of Mormon leads to several anachronistic situations. The book, for example, at a period shortly after 600 B.C. draws upon Peter’s paraphrase of Moses’ words (Acts 3:22-23), instead of the words of Moses recorded in Deuteronomy 18:15, 18-19. A quick glance at the passage in Acts and in the Book of Mormon shows how dependent the Book of Mormon passage is upon Peter’s paraphrase:

Acts 3:22-23

For Moses truly said unto the fathers, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you of your brethren, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. and it shall come to pass, that every soul, which will not hear that prophet, shall be destroyed from among the people.

1 Nephi 22:20

And the Lord will surely prepare a way for his people, unto the fulfilling of the words of Moses, which he spake, saying, A prophet shall the Lord your God raise up unto you, like unto me; him shall ye hear in all things whatsoever he shall say unto you. And it shall come to pass that all those who will not hear that prophet shall be cut off from among the people.

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